

Deer Hunting and Wisconsin's Tradition of Conservation

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ALMA - Thanksgiving and gun-deer hunting are finally here. All fall I heard from folks who live for the 9-day deer hunt. I visited local businesses and saw deer photos posted in work cubicles. I spoke to high school classes or at town hall meetings and the conversation eventually turned to the great outdoors and hunting.

As the Senator from Buffalo County- the Deer Hunting Capital of the Midwest- many visitors to my Capitol office look for that trophy buck on the wall. A few of my Buffalo County visitors kid me saying my little buck must have come from some other county.

Many of us live to hunt and fish and enjoy the great outdoors. And we all have a role in preserving what we love.

Hunters play an important role in deer ecology. Wildlife biologists assess deer population and decide the proper harvest of deer by management regions. Western Wisconsin has a strong deer population. But in the north deer may be harder to find. For this reason DNR officials dropped the antlerless quota allocation for forested deer units in northern Wisconsin to the lowest level since 1997 as reported in the Eau Claire Leader Telegram.

A perennial problem for some hunters is locating hunting land. DNR made this task a little easier by creating a link to land open to public hunting (<http://dnr.wi.gov/topic/lands/>).

The site provides an excellent description of the many publicly-owned and accessible properties. Anyone who loves the outdoors would benefit from a visit to this site. You can choose to search by 22 types of activities from ATV riding to Wildlife Viewing.

As I traveled to cities and villages this fall I was struck by the universal love of Wisconsin's environment. Whether it's boating, fishing, bird watching, hunting or hiking – we live here because we love the outdoors.

Thanksgiving is a great time to reflect on the bounty of the land and waters. It's also the time to renew our commitment to protect our lands and waterways for future generations.

Throughout Wisconsin's history, conservation initiatives improved our environment. Past leaders established programs like the Warren Knowles-Gaylord Nelson Stewardship program to set aside land through acquisition and conservation development. The program was named after two of our strongest conservation-minded governors – one of each political stripe.

It's this bipartisan approach to conservation that helped protect Wisconsin. Long time rural residents tell me how conservation practices in the last 80 years brought back wildlife, preserved topsoil and cleaned up waterways.

It's the concern about preserving this bipartisan approach that prompted so many people to talk with me about legislation they see as eroding our strong conservation traditions.

For example, in town hall meetings I was questioned repeatedly about the wisdom of selling 10,000 acres of state land. This requirement was slipped in the budget. Land sales come at the same time as another budget requirement allowing the sale of state assets in no-bid contracts. People fear possible questionable land deals.

Over and over again questions were asked about the effect of recent law changes on the protection of water, particularly wetlands, ground water and the loosening of mine construction rules. The rapid growth of sand mines and understaffing of mine inspectors brings deep citizen distrust of the state's ability to enforce even existing protections of land and water.

Rural folks are concerned about cuts to the farmer cost-share conservation program. It's

through state/land-owner financed projects that farmers are able to clean up barnyards with manure storage facilities, fence off streams, grow grass waterways and put in place stream buffer zones; all practices that help keep nutrients out of the water.

Fish thrive in clean waters and anglers enjoy the benefits. But there's still a long way to go to cleaning up waterways. The program should be expanded, not cut back.

As we head out to partake of the bounty of our lands and waters, we must remember we are the stewards of our land and water. Let us act to preserve our resources for our children and their children.

I wish you a very Happy Thanksgiving. Enjoy our great outdoors. I'm heading out to find that 10-point buck hanging around my alfalfa field!

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